

Documentary films

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|Review|

International documentary festival Amsterdam: diversity to the fore

As a tale of two mutts stole the show, Orwa Nyrabia's first year at the helm of the world's biggest docfest brought a refreshing broadening of horizons



📷 'A magical world where dogs rule': Santiago strays Football and Chola, stars of Los Reyes.

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This year's 31st edition of the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam, the world's biggest showcase for the genre, was the first under its new artistic director, Orwa Nyrabia. A brilliant thinker and activist, the Syrian film-maker was always likely to introduce a different feel to IDFA, and, sure enough, by emphasising

geographical and social diversity he brought fresh perspectives to a programme that has sometimes lacked coherence.

All film festivals are facing pressure to account for their demographic makeup. Of nearly 300 movies shown at last month's 12-day event, 41% were made by women - a welcome improvement. Diversity takes many forms in the industry, however, and Nyrabia's stewardship marked an exciting step forward for the form, with challenging styles of film-making programmed throughout. Nyrabia has said that this comes naturally when you open the gates to storytelling styles from beyond Europe and the US.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the festival's standout documentary, *Los Reyes* (The Kings). Co-directed by the Chilean duo Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff, it follows Chola and Football, two street dogs who live in a skatepark in Santiago. This is a magical world where dogs rule. Largely shot from their vantage point, we watch as they go about their daily business - chasing bikes, hanging out with weed-smoking skaters, choosing what to carry around in their mouths. Chola's favourite game involves nudging a tennis ball to the end of a skate ramp before catching it as it's about to fall.

IDFA 2018 | Trailer | Los Reyes



Los Reyes - trailer

The two dogs are constant companions, neither of them in the best condition, though they benefit hugely from Pablo Valdés's cinematography which captures the pair in all their canine beauty (wonderful close-ups of tongues hanging out). While the style is poetic, there's a clear narrative too. *Los Reyes* is a bold and successful experiment: it puts the animals' perspective at its centre, not as a metaphor for anything human, but for its

own ends. The film deservedly won the special jury prize for feature-length documentary.

The other winner in this category highlighted a major theme of the festival: the global rise of the far right. *Reason*, in which the Indian film-maker Anand Patwardhan chronicles the rise of Hindu nationalism, has a running time of over four hours and contains some terrifying footage. Told entirely through observational material, much of it is horrible to watch: mobs are whipped up at far-right rallies, their hate amplified by a complicit media.

But Patwardhan is a master of varying pace and tone. Just as we lose heart, we meet members of the resistance who are trying to bring back reason and rationale to the country, leaving us with a fleeting sense of uncertain hope. As much about class as race or religion, *Reason* superbly documents the rise of the right in an Indian context.

IDFA 2018 | Trailer | Reason



Reason - trailer

Less successful on a similar theme was Errol Morris's *American Dharma*, in which the director is bamboozled by Steve Bannon, the former chief strategist to Donald Trump. Bannon seizes upon the opportunity presented by a darling of the progressive media making a film about him, using it to weave his own self-mythology. *American Dharma*'s inclusion at the festival seems strange: while the need to hear from those we fear and loathe is one thing; giving them a platform to normalise and even elevate themselves is quite another.

As it is, Bannon is allowed an unchallenged platform to paint himself as a kingmaker for the people, using his favourite films (*Paths of Glory*; *The*

Bridge on the River Kwai; Morris's own *The Fog of War*) as evidence. Bannon identifies with Falstaff in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*, building up Prince Hal in the name of the populace then withdrawing at the right moment. Morris vaguely questions this reading but at no point truly critiques Bannon on real-world politics. The dramatic music and action-film warehouse setting of the whole piece will please viewers on the alt-right, where Bannon is seen as a hero.

Elsewhere, loosely on an environmental theme, I loved the gorgeous *Aquarela*, Russian director Victor Kossakovsky's world-spanning take on water in all its forms. I saw it in a cinema with Dolby Surround, which felt like being submerged in dripping cold water for 90 minutes while being pummelled by loud post-rock music. The opening sequence, in which rescuers help drivers whose cars have dropped into a thawed Siberian lake, is among the most outstanding I've seen in a documentary.

Kossakovsky has always been wonderful at composition, and in one sequence here serves us a breathtaking picture of rescue vehicles on broken ice in the foreground, bikes being ridden in the middle distance, and a massive barn on fire in the background.

IDFA 2018 | Trailer | Don't Be a Dick About It



Don't Be a Dick About It - trailer

There was lighter fare from IDFA audience winner *Don't Be a Dick About It*, by Ben Mullinkosson, about two red-headed young American brothers in constant bickering mode while remaining dedicated to each another. Special mention, too, for Tomer Heymann's *Jonathan Agassi Saved My Life*, the story

of a gay Israeli hardcore porn star descending into the abyss; brave enough, along the way, to critique himself as much as his dysfunctional family.

This year's IDFA was an intense experience, reflecting a world ill at ease with itself. Importantly, it felt like it was indeed covering the whole world, for which Orwa Nyrabia deserves much praise.

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